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## **“Usurpt by Cyclops”: Rivers, Industry, and Environment in Eighteenth-Century Poetry**

**Penny Fielding**

The river, as it flows through literary history, traces the course of poetry's spatial relations to the environment. In particular, there is a strong case for seeing in river poetry a slow change in ways of thinking about the natural and the geographical. In the eighteenth century, the poetic river describes an observable transition from the national to the local, and in this course it seems to confirm the well-known narrative of Romanticism as a reactive movement. The spatial sensibilities of Romantic writers are frequently figured as a response to a number of social changes including the enclosure of common land, manufacture and capitalism, increasing urbanisation, the development of turnpike roads and the imposition of mechanical forces onto the landscape.<sup>1</sup> Following these trajectories, the river comes to be rewritten as part of nature against its co-option into industrial Britain, and becomes the focus of the local as a place of affect, sheltering the subject from impersonal space.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Ivanka Kovacevich, “The Mechanical Muse: The Impact of Technical Inventions on Eighteenth-Century Neoclassical Poetry,” *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 28/3 (1965): 263-281.

All this is well-known, and in many ways it remains a helpful historical view of eighteenth-century river poetry, with the river a very good locus for tracing the development of spatial thinking in the long eighteenth century from Pope to Wordsworth. But it also offers an opportunity to rethink the history of place in ideas about nature where these ideas congregate around a particularly unstable spatial structure: the river. In this essay I will explore the history of river-poetry, but I will also pay attention to the way this history is grounded on a doubled conceptualisation of space. The river has a distinct geography, one that it draws from the localities through which it passes and (particularly in the case of national poetry) the relations between such localities. But for it to *be* a river, rather than a collection of those places, the river also maintains a second status that is much more difficult to describe—its constitution in water. This second identity is one with its own history that emerges when the river must stand for something clear, or pure, or originary, for example when the river meets the industrial revolution, and I will focus later in the essay on Anna Seward’s “Colebrook Dale” in which the native purity of the river is “usurpt” by the Cyclops of the iron industry. And in turn, the encounter between these intertwined histories—the river’s historical journey to the local and its obligation to act as pure nature—will speak to the concept of environment as a substrate for Romantic poetry.

First, however, we can survey the river’s role as a bearer of poetic spatiality. English river poetry had its origins in the Renaissance where the trope of the marriage of rivers (epitomized in the union of the Thames and the Isis) symbolized greater national harmonies. In the river epics of Spenser and Drayton, the confluence of rivers is held to emblemize forms of social union: marriages within powerful families, male and female relations, the national and geographical divisions within the state all contained in

established hierarchies (we can note the term “tributary,” applying both to the rivers and to aristocratic social organisation). Rivers draw the local into the service of the national. Michael Drayton’s *Poly-Olbion* (1612) is a national poem that, as Jonathan Bate puts it, “holds all Albion together through a network of rivers, each with its animated genius loci.”<sup>2</sup> Looking back to these earlier rivers (as Pat Rogers has demonstrated), Pope’s Thames in “Windsor-Forest” (1713) performs a national history in which the river draws the woods of the landed estate, raw material for the navy, through a London that funds imperial wars, to the sea upon which Britain’s imperial ambitions are satisfied.<sup>3</sup> The local here is understood as a point in a chain of production, each scene on the river only making sense in relation to an incremental series of national significance. “Windsor-Forest” is the best-known example, but here is a less famous, though just as representative extract of John Wilson’s mid-century poem *Clyde*. The Clyde addresses his fellow Scottish rivers, the Tweed and the Annan, on the subject of their imperial purpose:

Full well you know the imperial mandate given,  
 His salutary law who rules in heaven!  
 That, hasting hence, our waters seek the day,  
 And from a thousand fountains force their way,  
 Pour on the plain, and genial moisture yield  
 To verdant pasture, and to golden field;  
 Nurse the fair flowers which on our margins rise,

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), p. 224.

<sup>3</sup> For Pope’s continuation of the traditions of Renaissance river poetry see Pat Rogers, “‘Windsor-Forest,’ ‘Britannia’ and River Poetry,” *Studies in Philology* 77/3 (1980): 283-99.

And forests proud which sweep the lofty skies;  
 See populous cities on our banks extend,  
 And through their crowded gates their thousands send;  
 Feel mighty fleets on our fair bosoms ride,  
 Loading with war or wealth our labouring tide.<sup>4</sup>

Wilson's Clyde, like many other eighteenth-century rivers, tends towards the narrative structure of a list. Its function is connective and isometric, joining points of equivalent social or historical value. Wilson emphasises not only the national significance of great rivers but marks the turn to antiquarian interest, linking the castles and battle-fields that appear along the banks of the Clyde, tracing the national contours both historically and geographically.

At the other end of this history is the Romantic-period "native stream", a spot that takes its identity from remaining in the same place, while being revisited by a subject whose individual memories form the narrative of the river. A point on a river is no longer

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<sup>4</sup> John Wilson, "Clyde; A Poem", in John Leyden (ed.), *Scottish Descriptive Poems* (Edinburgh: Mundell and Son, 1803), p. 39. Wilson published an earlier version in 1764, and was preparing the second, much expanded edition for publication in 1767 when he was appointed superintendent of Greenock grammar school and the poem was never finished. The present text is John Leyden's collation of the two versions, as well as of an earlier trial run on the subject, "The Nethan," an unpublished manuscript. In his introduction, Leyden unkindly remarks that there are few Scottish loco-descriptive poems because Scottish place names "have a ludicrous effect when introduced into an English composition"(p. 17).

understood as part of a social chain, but as a singularity. Public, national poetry becomes personal and local. New forms of place act as protective enclaves from modern “space,” producing the local as a refuge from the global, a binary that often comes to be rooted in another: the natural as a refuge from the industrial. The term “native” also marks the turn from the river as emblem of the birth of all national subjects, to the river as signifier of the birth-place of the individual. With the reappearance of the sonnet in the 1770s, the river’s identity comes to construct the local in this new way. Rivers return as an important theme of the sonnet and they become the locus of personal memory, forming scenes whose appearance depends upon whomever is experiencing it. They share the idea of a place that is constituted by memory, and accrues its identity from the experience of the subject that visits it both in person and in the imagination. Thomas Warton’s “To the River Lodon,” for example, is one of a group of sonnets Warton published in 1777, and one, in the words of David Fairer, that “flowed into the work of many 1790s poets”:<sup>5</sup>

Ah! what a weary race my feet have run,  
 Since first I trod thy banks with alders crown'd,  
 And thought my way was all through fairy ground,  
 Beneath thy azure sky, and golden sun:  
 Where first my muse to lisp her notes begun!  
 While pensive memory traces back the round,  
 Which fills the varied interval between;  
 Much pleasure, more of sorrow, marks the scene.  
 Sweet native stream! those skies and suns so pure

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<sup>5</sup> David Fairer, *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790-1798* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 108.

No more return, to chear my evening road!  
 Yet still one joy remains, that not obscure,  
 Nor useless, all my vacant days have flow'd,  
 From youth's gay dawn to manhood's prime mature;  
 Nor with the Muse's laurel unbestow'd.<sup>6</sup>

The term “native stream” becomes much more common in poetry in the 1770s and after, used, among others, by Charlotte Smith (of the Arun) George Dyer (of the Stour), Coleridge (the Otter) and Wordsworth (the Wye). A number of ideas congregate around this term: the native subject, the nativity of the author and, importantly, the native or originary role of the river itself, a subject to which I shall shortly return. Here, however, I want to note how the tradition of river-poetry traces changes not only in what rivers can signify, but also in their relation to the viewing subject and that subject’s position in poetry. The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan points out that the importance of river names in the homogenization of territory in general is really a trick of perspective because “the name can be said to have created the system, and not just the parts visible to observers on the ground, accessible to consciousness.”<sup>7</sup> This reminds us how the poetry of rivers also depends on perspective--not what the river is but how it is constituted by the spatial relations of subject and object. When William Combes (later more famous for his *Dr Syntax* satires of the picturesque) writes in his history of rivers that “the history of the

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Warton, *Poems*, new ed. (London: T. Becket, 1777), p. 83.

<sup>7</sup> “Language and the Making of Place: A Narrative-Descriptive Approach,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 81 (1991): 684-96 (pp. 688-89).

river, is the history of whatever appears on its banks,”<sup>8</sup> the word “appears” is really a spatial metaphor. The objects on the banks remain in the same place and it is the imaginary eye that “appears” before them. In the river sonnets, however, the situation is reversed. The viewer remains stationary, or returns to the same spot, while the river flows past; the idea that the river’s identity can be frozen into a “spot of time” is an act of imaginary identification. For John Wilson, the river flows through many distinct places as the bearer of history and geography in general; for Warton, the river’s identity is static and it is the viewer who comes and goes in relation to the same place.

In both these contexts, then, the river helps us calibrate a poetic tradition in the long eighteenth century. But all the examples I have so far used demonstrate that the river is in fact quite an unstable image. Despite its popularity as the sign of geographical identity, the river itself can only be pressed into this service by the imposition of fixity, or the adjustment of perspective, or a sleight of hand in which the river itself is substituted by its banks. At this point, I want to mark a characteristic that we see in the Warton sonnet to the Lodon and in much river poetry. Warton describes the banks, the sky, the sun, but not the water of his “native stream.” Similarly, William Lisle Bowles’s “To the River Wensbeck” (1789), another poem popular among the first-generation Romantic poets, describes the scenery, imagines the *genius loci*, but barely mentions the object of his address. And although his sonnet “To the River Itchen” (1789) mentions the

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<sup>8</sup> William Combes, *An History of the Principal Rivers of Great Britain*, 2 vols. (London: W. Bulmer, 1794-96 ), vol. 1, p. ix. Despite his title, Combes never got further than the Thames, although he had originally planned to include the Severn, the Forth, and the Clyde.



“crumbling margin” of the bank, we are not told much about the element into which the margin crumbles.<sup>9</sup>

Rivers do, of course, speak for themselves in the long tradition of their personification in *genius loci*, but they do so through a kind of Lacanian subjectivity that emphasises the contextual, triangulated nature of their identity, either established against other rivers, or divided against itself. In the former category is the trope of the hierarchical arrangement of rivers where the Top River addresses its tributaries, a motif which lasts from Drayton’s *Poly-Olbion* to the Clyde’s address to the Tweed and the Annan that opens John Wilson’s *Clyde*. Other speaking rivers demonstrate a subjectivity divided between subject and object. Here, in the once rather popular but now forgotten “Hymn to the Nymph of Bristol Spring,” the Derwent “pours” himself. His strange agency (he pours himself, but his waters “form” a scene independently of him) is marked by a split subjectivity as he views himself with awe:

*Derwent*, as he pours

His oft obstructed stream down rough cascades

And broken precipices, views with awe,

With rapture, the fair scene his Waters form.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> W. L. Bowles, *Sonnets, Written chiefly on picturesque spots, during a tour*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Bath: R. Crutwell, 1789), p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> William Whitehead, *An Hymn to the Nymph of Bristol Spring* (London: R. Dodsley, 1751), p. 20.

So it is difficult to experience a river from the point of view *of* the river, and this raises some important questions about the river's ontology that will, in turn, have a bearing on its function as measure of literary history. How can we describe a river? What is it that is being described? As Wyman Herendeen has asked: "Is it the water between its banks, or the banks which embrace that protean element"?<sup>11</sup> These were also questions for eighteenth-century thinkers about rivers. In the preface to his *History of the Principal Rivers of Great Britain*, William Combes details the task of the riparian historian:

[...] the history of a river, is the history of whatever appears on its banks; from metropolitan magnificence to village simplicity; from the habitations of kings to the hut of the fisherman; from the woody brow, which is the pride of the landscape, to the secret plant that is visible only to the eye of the botanist. Nor must the river historian content himself with existing circumstances: it is his office to relate the past, as well as to describe the present; and while he gives the history, or represents the antiquities connected, with the scenes before him, he must delineate the scenes themselves. Indeed, he must sometimes throw upon the same page, historical relation and antiquarian research; the criticism of modern taste, and the sketch of landscape beauty.<sup>12</sup>

In Combes's capacious account of how to describe a river, its social significances, its history, its aesthetic appearance and the relation of aesthetics to taste and the role of the viewer, its antiquarian interest, its botanic secrets, one element is not mentioned: that of

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<sup>11</sup> Wyman H. Herendeen, *From Landscape to Literature: the River and the Myth of Geography* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1986), p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Combes, *History of the Principal Rivers*, vol. 1, pp. ix-x.

the river itself. The history of the river, Combes insists, is “the history of whatever appears on its banks”; the watery part of the river is not of interest to him.

And Combes is not alone. As we have seen, all the examples I have so far cited, whether of the river as the bearer of national history or of the river as the locus of personal memory, share the same characteristic of focusing on the frame of the river—either the activities on its banks or the memories of the speaker. The most ‘natural’ of features in the landscape, the river is also among the most historicized and the closest to the human activities of transportation, agriculture and leisure. The watery element remains the unspoken residue of history or memory, nature as gap or absence, assumed by the work of framing but seen in fleeting glimpses or not available in itself for description. The river is poised between its two roles: it is both a force that intensifies forms of identity and one that dissolves them. Drawing its character from its surroundings, the river itself remains oddly invisible even as it proclaims its distinct identity. Wordsworth, in his 1820 sonnet sequence *To the River Duddon*, catches this paradox as the river journeys through its determining contexts—its banks and the human activity it engages—towards the sea:

Not hurled precipitous from steep to steep;  
 Lingering no more 'mid flower-enamelled lands  
 And blooming thickets; nor by rocky bands  
 Held;--but in radiant progress tow'rd the Deep  
 Where mightiest rivers into powerless sleep

Sink, and forget their nature [.]<sup>13</sup>

As Paul de Man noted of this passage, the Duddon's entry into the sea "is presented [...] as a loss of self, the loss of the *name* that designates the river and allows it to take on the dignity of an autonomous subject. The diction of the passage, with the antithetical balance of 'mightiest' and 'powerless' is all the stronger since the apparent strategy of the poem does not seem to demand this kind of emphasis."<sup>14</sup> To this we might add that it is precisely at the moment when the river "sinks" into the sea that it forgets its nature. The point at which the river merges with another body of water is simultaneously the loss of its discrete nature and a reminder that it has a nature to be forgotten. It is with this paradoxical condition of the river in mind, that I want to take another look at the history of river poetry in the long eighteenth century. This will allow us to think of the river both historically and ontologically. On the one hand we can trace a history of rivers in poetry that changes throughout the gradual industrialization of eighteenth-century Britain. And on the other, we can see how rivers emphasize a problem of describing nature itself which, while laid open in the later eighteenth century, is a structural condition of all environmental writing.

The gradual industrialization of Britain in the eighteenth century produces a new kind of self consciousness about nature that we can see clearly in the tradition of river-poetry. Behind the move from national to local, from history to memory and from public

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<sup>13</sup> William Wordsworth, *To the River Duddon, The Cornell Wordsworth, Sonnet Series and Itinerary Poems, 1820-1845*, ed. Geoffrey Jackson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 74.

<sup>14</sup> Paul de Man, "Time and History in Wordsworth," *Diacritics* 17/4 (1987): 4-17 (p. 12).

to interior, is another structural movement: the emergence of the river as nature with all its attendant problems. Once the river becomes something to be polluted, diverted, dammed, or--as in Blake's "London" (1794)--' put in another way chartered', then it comes into view as something that should be pure, free, original or natural; , the 'natural' is produced by the threat of pollution or industrial manipulation and it is only when the river's water is thus threatened that it comes into view.

Industrialization lays bare tensions which are more hidden in earlier poetry and we can see this by comparing two river poems of the 1770s (a decade in which both physical rivers and river poetry were undergoing significant changes). R. Hipsseley's *Bath and It's* [sic] *Environs* contains both a history of the city of Bath and a genial excursion down the River Avon. Like much eighteenth-century loco-descriptive poetry, it sees the river as continuous with the regions through which it passes (the common use of "margin" for "bank" emphasises such liminality). The poem participates in a georgic mode that acknowledges the river's function in the lives of the people who use it for irrigation, washing, fishing, drinking, leisure and transport. In an act of patrician phenomenology, Hipsseley's Avon becomes the site of sensory experience, mixing sight, taste and sound, and making no clear distinction between the natural and social worlds. Hipsseley does not identify a "nature" that pre-exists all his cultural phenomena: the cows produce not milk, but syllabub ready-prepared, the French horns are indistinguishable from the river. The poem's synaesthesia blends sounds and tastes in the generalised "flow" of the river:

The *cows* with swelling udders ready stand,  
 Low for the pail, and court the *milk-maid's* hand,  
 As if they meant to tempt th'insatiate taste

With *syllabub*, that flow'r of rural feast:  
 And, as we down the silver AVON sail,  
 Fann'd by the *zephyrs* of the evening-gale,  
 The *French-horn* airs, like the *stream*, flow along,  
 Now sweetly soft, and now sublimely strong.<sup>15</sup>

As the Avon runs through human lives it is understood in these contexts and shaped by them, moving all the time between subject and object. The river irrigates the land and makes human activity possible, while humans shape the river through their aesthetic experience. Of course this phenomenological idyll is also a pastoral fantasy for the leisured class: cows, milkmaids and the aristocratic revellers appear to inhabit one and the same world in which there is no division of labor.<sup>16</sup>

The year before *Bath and It's Environs*, Henry James Pye published his loco-descriptive *Faringdon Hill*. From the title, this sounds like a prospect poem in which the poet praises the vista supplied by a landowner from the top of a hill, and it does start off

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<sup>15</sup> [R. Hippseley], *Bath, and it's Environs: A Descriptive Poem in Three Cantos* (Bath: R. Crutwell, 1775), p. 25. For the ecology of aristocratic landscapes in the eighteenth century, see Donna Landry, *The Invention of the Countryside: Hunting, Walking and Ecology in English Literature, 1671-1831* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 68-72.

<sup>16</sup>In an important study of river-writing Bridget Keegan shows how later laboring-class poets, especially the Northumbrian writer Anne Wilson, work to democratize the genre, insisting on the recognition of women's labor in multiple activities along the river, *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry, 1730-1837* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 98-121.

in this mode. By the 1770s, however, the river had become the central attraction, allowing the poet to move through the landscape without hills getting in the way: “Beneath how open lies the spacious scene! / No lofty mountain envious intervene.”<sup>17</sup> But Pye’s river faces a new challenge in the form of a different kind of waterway: the canal. *Faringdon Hill* marks a separation of the river as nature and the canal as the bearer of economic improvement, social rank and national prosperity. The historical river that “naturally” connects points of social sameness now comes to be defined against its industrial other, an act which produces the river as purely natural:

Let channels form’d by art, be ever led  
Where no fair current wears a native bed;  
Then through the obstructing hill, and o’er the vale,  
Like EGERTON conduct the swelling sail:  
Even Isis shall applaud, if from her source,  
To where SABRINA pours her amber course;  
They’ll bid the smooth canal it’s length display,  
And feed with copious springs the tedious way:  
Till the fraught barge the long extent explores,  
From BRISTOL’s crowded wharf to LONDON’s princely shores.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Henry James Pye, *Faringdon Hill: A Poem* (Oxford: Daniel Prince, 1774), p. 19. Pye became (a famously bad) Poet Laureate in 1790.

<sup>18</sup> *Faringdon Hill*, p. 18. Francis Egerton, 3rd Duke of Bridgewater, built a number of the most important industrial canals in North-West England.

The passage hints at a geographical bifurcation taking place in river-writing. The canal takes over national identities, linking the trading centres of London and Bristol, leaving the river to inhabit the more affective locus of the “native.” Pye’s poem acknowledges a separation between the river as a utilitarian and an aesthetic object, which is also a separation between poetry and economics, or literature and engineering. Outside poetry, most eighteenth-century writing specifically about rivers concerns projects for or complaints about attempts to alter their course, to raise or lower them, to create cuts, or to build weirs and bridges. We are reminded of Adam Smith’s vision of a nation drawn together by its transport networks: “Good roads, canals, and navigable rivers, by diminishing the expence of carriage, put the remote parts of a country nearly upon a level with those in the neighbourhood of the town. They are, upon that account, the greatest of all improvements.”<sup>19</sup> The comparison of Pye and Hippiesely, who published almost in the same year, does not so much enact a moment of historical transition, as lay open a tension that was always there in the representation of nature. Industrialization lends a new specificity to river poetry as the river is perceived to be endangered. The river’s water comes—in a sense—into view at the point at which its natural purity, or spatial freedom, is challenged. To put it another way, the river’s identity as that which flows between its banks is constituted by threats to a natural or pure state produced by those threats themselves.

The idea of the river as nature is embedded in that of the river as origin. Unlike other natural features, rivers all *have* a visible origin in their source, but they are also the

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<sup>19</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell, A. S. Skinner and W. B. Todd, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), vol. I, p. 163.



site of the very idea of originality. This is true on both a national and local level. Throughout the eighteenth century, an interest in toponymy sought out the origins of Britain in its ancient languages, and in particular in the names of rivers. Leibniz had remarked: “Since the distant origins of nations transcend history, languages take for us the place of old documents. The most ancient vestiges of languages remain in the names of rivers and forests, which very often survive the changes of populations.”<sup>20</sup> And for Scottish antiquarians in particular this was an opportunity to stress that the ‘original’ Britons were Celts. George Chalmers, in an epic attempt to trace the ancient topology of Britain and Ireland to Celtic sources, claims that rivers bear the earliest traces of the original (in Chalmers’s view) British nation: “it is certain, that rivers very seldom change their names, which continue to run, age after age, through tribes of various lineages, and speaking different languages, from the names of the rivers.”<sup>21</sup> Rivers seemed in particular to demonstrate an Adamic system of naming in which the river as thing corresponds exactly to its name, and Chalmers points out (sometimes inaccurately) where river-names mean “bright” or “clear,” or, as in the many river-names incorporating the Celtic word *afon*, “river.”

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Hans Aarsleff, “The Study and Use of Etymology in Leibniz,” in *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (London: Athlone Press, 1982), pp. 83-100 (p. 86).

<sup>21</sup> George Chalmers, *Caledonia: or, An Account, historical and topographic, of North Britain: from the most ancient to the present times*, 3 vols. (London: T. Cadell and W Davies, 1807-24), vol. 3, p. 454. For a study of toponymy and nationalism, see Penny Fielding, *Scotland and the Fictions of Geography: North Britain 1760-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 101-27.

These ancient correspondences hold true for the local, as well as for the national identities of rivers with their tutelary gods and attendant nymphs, and many rivers come complete with their own myths of origin. In a neo-classical tradition, often superimposed on British mythology, the origin of the river is frequently associated with a problematic idea of purity. This idea—of the river as pure—is its principal claim for an ontological separateness, or for its watery identity as distinct from that conferred by its banks. But, as Jacques Derrida demonstrates, the origin can never be pure.<sup>22</sup> Even to imagine an origin uncontaminated by any previous ideas is an act that produces purity as a comparative, differential process. The idea of the pure is therefore open to paradox and ambiguity. We can see how this comes into focus with the industrial river-poetry of Anne Seward, but first I want briefly to introduce it through a slightly earlier example: Pope's "Windsor-Forest" in which the nymph Lodona, pursued by Pan, is transformed into the river Loddon.<sup>23</sup> Once metamorphosed, her "Virgin Coldness"<sup>24</sup> becomes one with the river,

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<sup>22</sup> This is an idea that operates for Derrida in all the contexts of representation, but most relevant here is his deconstruction of the origin in Enlightenment thinking: "The concept of the origin or nature is nothing but the myth of addition, of supplementarity annulled by being purely additive." *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976), p. 167.

<sup>23</sup> Lodona seems to be transformed into a river to escape violation at the hands of Pan, but the poem hints that it is already too late. As Christa Knellwolf has shown, the poem is extremely reluctant to divulge—or unable to decide—whether or not the rape has taken place. See *A Contradiction Still: Representations of Women in the Poetry of Alexander Pope* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 71-76.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Pope, "Windsor-Forest," *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1968), p. 202. The Lodona passage occupies ll. 171-219.

guaranteeing her, and its purity, as well as its local name. Yet, as Mary Douglas has told us, this kind of status is really a response to the ambiguities that threaten the rational social order from within. The preservation of virginity is one such example within the symbolic systems of “beliefs which symbolise the body as an imperfect container which will only be perfect if it can be made impermeable.”<sup>25</sup> Lodona’s virginity is to be preserved in an everlasting stasis; in Douglas’s terms: “Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise.”<sup>26</sup> But as Douglas goes on to point out, this is also an example of the contradictions bound up in the very systems that call for purity. Lodona’s position is highly ambiguous, as her weeping body—the source of the river’s own chastity—remains permeable. Her “Virgin Coldness” is both reified in its marmoreal permanence, and “dissolv’d away.” In a way that we have already seen in speaking rivers, the borders of interiority and exteriority, subject and object collapse: she both *is* the river and bathes *in* the river. She both inaugurates the river, and supplements it as her tears “augment” the waves. In short, she and the other tutelary virgins who have been either drowned in the river or changed into water-nymphs to escape sexual violation, suggest that the very purity of their watery nature is produced by a threat of violence that precedes it, or calls it into being. The threat that seems to supervene upon “natural” purity is really what structures that idea of purity in the first place.

This structure is given a more specific social contexts when the ambiguous purity of Pope’s river is taken up later in the century by Anna Seward. Seward recontextualises the violated nymph figure, and (where it is a passing incident in “Windsor-Forest”) makes it the central trope of her poem ‘Colebrook Dale’, a response to the effects of iron-ore

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<sup>25</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), p. 159.

<sup>26</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 163.

smelting along the River Severn at Coalbrookdale in the English West Midlands. Along with the Thames, the most mythologized of British rivers is perhaps the Severn. Its Latin name is Sabrina (in Welsh, Hafren or Habren) and Sabrina appears as a character throughout literature as the river's *genius loci*. The story is told in Drayton's *Poly-Olbion*, although she is probably more familiar from Milton's *Masque at Ludlow*, in which she rises from her oozy bed to protect the Lady from the Saturnalian grasp of Comus. Sabrina clearly has something to do with the identification of purity, and in a study of her appearances up to and including *Comus*, Philip Schwyzer has traced her lineage from the mythological Hafren, or Habren, the Welsh name for the river, the illegitimate daughter of the English King Locrin and a German Princess, who is drowned in the river.<sup>27</sup> Sabrina, then, is related to ambiguous ideas of purity invaded by hybridity and seduction and in "Colebrook Dale" her appearance gives a new historical specificity to her earlier metamorphoses, as well as that of Pope's Lodona.

"Colebrook Dale" has verbal echoes of both *Comus* and *Windsor-Forest*, and has much to say about the turn river-poetry takes when confronted with industrialization, but—underlying this historical moment—the poem also addresses the structural effect that we have witnessed in all river poetry: the challenge of representing the river as natural. As Sharon Setzer has argued, "Colebrook Dale" is an intricately environmental

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<sup>27</sup> Schwyzer brilliantly shows how the ambiguities that attend rivers and virginity in *Comus* are bound up in questions of national geography: "Purity and Danger on the West Bank of the Severn: The Cultural Geography of a Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634," *Representations* 60 (1997): 22-48.

poem that imbricates its ecological argument in ideas about gender.<sup>28</sup> Although my own reading of “Colebrook Dale” is much indebted to Setzer’s, I will think not about gender *per se* but rather about the poem’s images of violation in relation to the violence of representation.

“Colebrook Dale” explicitly situates itself in a tradition of river-poems, but Seward’s poem also draws together a number of the more general questions that the rivers in this essay have raised—questions that come together in the ontology of place. Timothy Morton has recently described one of the crucial problems for ecology: the place of nature in what we think of as the environment.<sup>29</sup> He identifies a paradoxical condition in much ecological thinking: while the human subject is always part of its environment, we nevertheless have to conjure up environment as an abstracted, reified “nature” from which, during the time we are contemplating it, we are removed. He thus isolates an important problem with the term “environment.” Its ontological status is “that which surrounds us and of which we are part;” when we become environmentalists, however, and start thinking about it, “the environment” becomes an object before us. Morton argues that in much ecocriticism, the environment is a kind of *pharmakon* that emerges with Romanticism, simultaneously the pure place of nature that connects our sensibility to

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<sup>28</sup> Sharon Setzer, “‘Pond’rous Engines” in ‘Outraged Groves’: The Environmental Argument of Anna Seward’s ‘Colebrook Dale’”, *European Romantic Review* 18/1 (2007): 69-82. See also Donna Coffey, “Protecting the Botanic Garden: Seward, Darwin, and Coalbrookdale,” *Women’s Studies* 31 (2002): 141–64.

<sup>29</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007).

the earth, and the object of fetishization, appropriation, tourism and ultimately consumerism that wrenches it away from its supposed origins.

The river enacts this problem. On the one hand, as we have seen, it is pressed into service as the natural origin of nations or property (Pope), or the natural source of social pleasures (Hippesley and the eighteenth-century Georgic), or the living substrate of subjective experience (the river sonnets). In all of these instances, the river stands as, in Morton's terms, a 'solid metaphysical bedrock (Nature or Life, for instance)' that precedes all forms of thinking."<sup>30</sup> Yet, on the other hand, the river can never be produced as such, but only as gap, residue or absence. Wordsworth's Duddon expresses its "nature" at the moment of forgetting that nature; the personified identity of Pope's Lodon is "dissolv'd away" at the very point of its origin. This is the issue that Seward addresses. The poem opens with the pollution, expressed as the "violation" of Coalbrookdale: "Scene of superfluous grace, and wasted bloom, / O, violated Colebrook!" (ll. 1-2).<sup>31</sup> The river has been invaded by "fuliginous" tribes of iron-workers, and the resident nymphs have new competition:

Now we view

Their fresh, their fragrant, and their silent reign

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<sup>30</sup> Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, p. 171.

<sup>31</sup> *The Poetical Works of Anna Seward*, ed. Walter Scott, 3 vols, Edinburgh: John Ballantyne, 1810), vol. 2, pp. 314-19. Further citations are by line number in the text. The poem also exists as a MS transcription of an early version from 1790, and this has been published in David Fairer and Christine Gerrard (eds), *Eighteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1999), pp. 524-27.

Usurpt by Cyclops;--hear, in mingled tones,  
 Shout their throng'd barge, their pond'rous engines clang  
 Through thy coy dales; while red the countless fires,  
 With umber'd flames, bicker on all thy hills,  
 Dark'ning the Summer's sun with columns large  
 Of thick, sulphureous smoke, which spread, like palls,  
 That screen the dead, upon the sylvan robe  
 Of thy aspiring rocks; pollute thy gales,  
 And stain thy glassy waters. (ll. 20-30)

But these acts of usurpation, pollution and staining turn out not to be quite straightforward. The violation of the natural turns on the nature of locality in the identification of nature as Seward catches a tension within Romanticism between 'nature' as a foundational or general concept, and place as a specific or singular one. "Colebrook Dale" is anxious about the destruction of Coalbrookdale, but it is not quite clear exactly what Seward wants to preserve. The poem seems to hesitate between a view of *all* nature being violated by industry, and a view of *this* spot in particular being destroyed. That is to say, the poem raises questions about the nature of place as well as about the place of nature. Industry, the poem goes on to claim, should get on with destroying places less "propitious" to poetry, and leave Coalbrookdale alone. The argument works like this: Coalbrookdale as a place is nature unspoiled and should remain so. Other places can be subject to industrialization, but not this one. But if nature is natural and precedes industrialization, how can one locality be more natural than another? Seward's answer is that Coalbrookdale is more poetic. The Industrial revolution must remove itself to "Sheffield's arid moor, or Ketley's heath" (l. 101). The suggestion here is not quite, as

Roy Porter suggests of the poem, that “the right place for industry was in town.”<sup>32</sup> These places are moors, heaths, and (in a note on Ketley) wolds (in the manuscript, “wilds.”) They are natural, but they are nature of the wrong sort, because “there no Poet rov’d / To catch bright inspirations” (ll. 103-4). But there is a problem of definition here: if Coalbrookdale is more “poetic” than these other natural places, then we have already removed it from the realm of nature. In order to be recognisable as poetic, it has become already acculturated and commodified. The very act of localising and particularising place, so far from ensuring its natural status, renders it discursive, socialised and produced. As Timothy Morton says, “ecological thinking is highly aestheticised,”<sup>33</sup> and the poem recognises this. When Seward refers to the scene as “violated Colebrook,” we can read this as a contemporary reference to the iron-smelting, but also as a reference to the Severn, with its mythological history of violence and hybridity at the origin. In “Colebrook Dale,” then, “violated Colebrook” is, in a manner of speaking, already violated. The poem does not try to produce a pure, natural environment, but acknowledges that environment ceases to become pure or, in fact, environmental, as soon it becomes the subject of discursive attention.

Unlike many of the late eighteenth-century river poets, Seward is very interested in water. One of the poem’s most striking passages describes the river as it becomes polluted with industrial waste. In an industrial act of making the river’s water visible, Seward writes:

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<sup>32</sup> Roy Porter, ‘In England’s Green and Pleasant Land’, in Howard Murphy and Kate Flint (eds), *Culture, Landscape, and the Environment: the Linacre Lectures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 15-43 (p. 37).

<sup>33</sup> Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, p. 171.



So, with intent transmutant, Chemists bruise  
 The shrinking leaves and flowers, whose steams saline,  
 Congealing swift on the recipient's sides,  
 Shoot into crystals;--and the night-frost thus  
 Insidious creeping on the watry plain,  
 Wave after wave incrusts, till liquid change  
 To solid, and support the volant foot. (ll. 77-83)

The poem here looks back at the eighteenth-century tradition of the “frost-piece,” where frost alchemically transforms the landscape. This passage recalls Ambrose Phillip’s “Winter Piece” (1709) or more immediately (and significantly) the frost passage added to the 1730 revision of James Thomson’s *Winter* in which the frost appears to the scientific eye as “Myriads of little salts.” Like Seward’s saline, congealing night-frost, Thomson’s salty frost seems to have “steam’d” from the sky and, her “watry plain” recalls his river as it becomes “A crystal pavement”:

The loosened ice,  
 Let down the flood and half dissolved by day,  
 Rustles no more; but to the sedgy bank  
 Fast grows, or gathers round the pointed stone,  
 A crystal pavement, by the breath of heaven  
 Cemented firm; till, seized from shore to shore,

The whole imprisoned river grows below.<sup>34</sup>

On first comparison the verbal and imagistic parallels between the two passages point to a contrast. Thomson's fascination with the microscopic structure of frost and his easy moves between matter and metaphor seem very different from Seward's sinister encrustation, poised uneasily between metaphor (for the urban spread of industrial Birmingham) and metonym (the chemical encrustation standing for industrial pollution in general). Setzer rightly notes that Seward's passage intimates "an environmental catastrophe rather than mercantile progress."<sup>35</sup> But, as Setzer and others have observed, the poem is always ambivalent about its industrial subject. It is science that both corrupts and inspires poetic nature. What at first was an argument that industry had destroyed the poetic quality of Colebrook Dale now becomes the enactment of science as poetic metaphor. Viewed in this way, Seward moves closer to the model of *The Seasons*: in both of the frost passages, poetry proceeds from scientific processes. Even as Seward denies the poetic role of industry, she makes industrial science into poetry. The river is *already* removed from nature as an originary state in so far as its "crystal flood" is really no different from the crystals in the scientists' test-tubes.

Seward is particularly interested in the process of condensation, which draws together "natural" and "industrial" functions of water. The condensing process of water vapour (itself used as a metaphor for the changes wrought on the landscape by the cities)

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<sup>34</sup> James Thomson, *The Seasons*, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 148.

<sup>35</sup> Setzer, "'Pond'rous Engines,'" p. 77

moves from the hands of the chemists to those of the engineer (here described as an “artist”):

Science there  
 Leads her enlighten'd sons, to guide the hand  
 Of the prompt artist, and with great design  
 Plan the vast engine, whose extended arms,  
 Heavy and huge, on the soft-seeming breath  
 Of the hot steam, rise slowly;-- till, by cold  
 Condens'd, it leaves them soon, with clanging roar,  
 Down, down, to fall precipitant [. ] (ll. 51-58)

And then, almost immediately, condensation is reinstated into the natural world:

And SHEFFIELD, smoke-involv'd; dim where she stands  
 Circled by lofty mountains, which condense  
 Her dark and spiral wreaths to drizzling rains [. ] (ll. 93-95)

The Severn in “Colebrook Dale” works not as nature itself, but as the *idea* of environment. Seward’s repeated references to condensation—the movement of water between gas and liquid, and between visible and invisible--traces the river’s own movement between a fixed, material place, and the continual slipping-away from place. Seward’s lament for the loss of Coalbrookdale is also an acknowledgement of the impossibility of a fixed place that can bear either local experience or national meaning.

Her *genius loci*, a figure that through personification should be the very embodiment of place, is asleep:

The Genius of thy shades, by Plutus brib'd,  
 Amid thy grassy lanes, thy woodwild glens,  
 Thy knolls and bubbling wells, thy rocks, and streams,  
 Slumbers! (ll. 4-7)

Instead, the poem proposes a more modern use of the term:

the rapt sage,  
 Who trac'd the viewless Aura's subtle breath  
 Through all its various powers, there bending feeds  
 The lamp of Science with the richest oils  
 Which the arch-chemist, Genius, knows to draw  
 From Nature's stores, or latent, or reveal'd. (ll. 61-66)

Here Seward extends and complicates the position of the genius who has moved from *genius loci*, guardian of a singular place in nature and, by virtue of that singularity guardian of its naturalness, to a new form of Genius. For this figure, seemingly an amalgamation of Joseph Priestly and the Thomsonian God, science is continuous with a nature that collaborates with industrial Britain, “revealing” her stores. Scientific advances no longer intrude upon an untouched nature; rather they uncover the “stores” that were already waiting within.

Geoffrey Hartman has identified a tension between different forms of genius that comes to light in the Romantic-period return to the *genius loci* and adaptation of the motif from an external spirit of place to an internalised poetic inspiration. Hartman juggles three terms: *genius loci* (spirit of place), Genius (spirit or intellectual abstraction beyond the individual) and the subject as genius. The organic link between “spirit” and “place” revitalizes the *genius loci* for the Romantic poet, cultivating and strengthening the imaginative link between poet and place, while still drawing on the suprahuman or transcendental force of spirit: “The genius loci can rival Genius as an influence, for it suggests the possibility of a more natural (unselfconscious) participation in a preexistent or larger self.”<sup>36</sup> The Romanticization of the *genius loci* also allows a move between local and national to be invested with ideas of destiny, prophecy and spirit, as ‘native’ shifts to ‘national’ and the local gives topoi to more abstract ideas: “[w]e see the spirited form, not the nebulous. The imagery of the tribe is given bounding outline; the imaginative vigor of national prejudices acknowledged and faced.”<sup>37</sup>

Seward offers an interesting variation on this history as she disrupts the link between Genius and *genius loci*, between national industry and native stream, and between nature as continuous, abstract process and as felt, singular spot. The poem

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<sup>36</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, “Toward Literary History,” in *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 356-86 (p. 374). See also “Romantic Poetry and the Genius Loci” in the same volume, pp. 311-36.

<sup>37</sup> Hartman, “Toward Literary History,” p. 375. Timothy Morton detects in modern forms of ecology a return to the organicist environmentalism of Romanticism: “Externalised *genius* has returned to the idea of the *genius loci*, the spirit of the place, which the artist tries to capture” (*Ecology Without Nature*, p. 190).

hesitates between versions of the place of nature, unable to reconcile specific places with a wider geography. Seward positions “Colebrook Dale” between its plea to rescue nature by preserving it in the local, and a recognition of the contradictions inherent in that strategy. Neither the *genius loci* nor the eponymous river-nymph can embody the natural because that very act of embodiment or personification is really a produce of genius as art, industry, discourse or, at its most basic level, language. “Colebrook Dale” both gestures towards and resists the turn taken by the river sonnets of the 1770s and the subsequent course of the river into the Romantic local as poetry increasingly identifies the natural with rivers localised through personal experience. And in this it is both the least and the most representative of long-eighteenth-century river poems, anomalous because of its hesitations, but also most conscious of the strange structure of the river itself.